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ABSTRACT

This paper traces some of the early 20th century roots of aesthetic formalism as they came to effect the development of art education theory and practice in this country up to the beginning of the Second World War. The paper focuses on American sources and on the writings and ideas of Benman Ross, Arthur Wesley Dow, J. Hambidge, Albert C. Barnes, and John Dewey. It also considers the historical connections to British art education theory in the writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry. The paper concludes with some observations relative to the status and the directions of present-day concerns in art education both in this country and in Canada and in England. (Author/JD)

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A CONSIDERATION OF THE ROOTS OF THE FORMALISTIC AESTHETIC IN ART EDUCATION HISTORY

BY

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE HISTORY OF ART EDUCATION CONFERENCE AT THE PENN STATE UNIVERSITY IN OCT 1989.

PAPER REVISED FOR INCLUSION IN THE PRECEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE.

This paper has been edited to include some of the remarks and the presentations which took place at the conference.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will trace some of the early 20 th century roots of aesthetic formalism as they came to effect the development of art education theory and practice in this country up to the beginning of the Second World War. The paper will focus specific attention on the American sources and the writings and ideas of;

DENMAN ROSS
ARTHUR WESLEY DOW
JAY HAMBIDGE

ALBERT C BARNES
JOHN DEWEY

It will also consider the historical connections to British art education theory in the writings of;

CLIVE BELL
ROGER FRY

Finally the paper will conclude with some observations relative to the status and the directions of present day concerns in art education both in this country

in Canada and in England. At the SECOND Penn State Conference on Art Education History Elliot Eisner of Stanford University in his keynote address challenged the participants to do more then be art education antiquarians and treat as precious : objects the results of their studies of the past which have all too often resulted in the re-discovery of lost souls, the re-doing of old methods, and the new interest in drawings and the study of drawings by adults and children from the past.

In Eisner's view,for art education history to become relevent to the present, those who have chosen this area of research ought to make the effort to establish those connections which will seek to

illume the many problems which we as a field, a discipline of study, and as a profession seem to face at this moment in the closing years of our century. As this paper will show, so much of art education history has been connected to the story in our century of the modern movement.

Prsent post-modern concerns also give to us a new mode of thinking about not only the history that we as art education historians have chosen to study but about the very nature of that process of discovery.

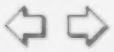
This paper is concerned with formalism in both the United States and in England. Unfortunately it will be necessary to make some references to D B A E and to the recent ideas of the Getty Center for Education in the Arts.

I say unfortunately,because many critics of discipline based art education have observed that almost every paper or presentation seems to feel the necessity of mentioning D.B.A.E. I have made these observations in an attempt to relate and connect history to current practices and thinking about art education curriculium.

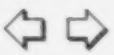
INTRODUCTION

It has been the custom to date the advent of aesthetic formalism with the publication of Clive Bell's book, ART. [Bell, 1913] While Bell, Fry, and later Collingwood have been credited with the development of a formalist aesthetic; there were less well known contributors who were in a sense even more critical to the influences on art education in the United States in the years between the two world wars.

There is probably no better source for insights concerning the development of esthetics and art criticism in this country then the founder of the American Society for Aesthetics, Thomas Munro. Munro has written as follows concerning those early years in 20 th. century aesthetics and art theory and the relationships between the ideas of the principal figures which will be covered in detail in this paper. Munro observed as follows;



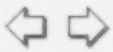
" Two avante-garde critics of the visual arts in the early 20 century were Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Both were informal essayists rather then systemic theorists. Bell exploded into violence in denouceing evolutionism. To criticize an work of art historically is to play the science=bespotted fool. No more disastrous theory he said ever issued from the brain of an charlatan then that of evolution in art. Giotto was not a creeping grub that merely led to Titian as a butterfly. To think of an artist as leading to the art of someone else is to misunderstand art." [Munro, 1959] [1]



For Bell and the other formalist the source and evolution of art and the artist was to be found either within the individual work of art; To be found within what Bell attempted to present to his readers as his theory of significant form.

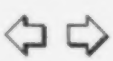
ART AS SIGNIFICANT FORM

Munro continues with his description of Bell's fellow English critic Roger Fry with these words;



' Fry, whose thought and language were more temperate and based upon detailed analyses of examples, likewise took an unfavorable view in 1917 of the view of the work of art as crystallised history. He was an early exponent of that school of criticism which called for more attention to particuliar works of art for their directly perceptual, visual forms, for structured design and harmony as oppossed to historical and literary associations.' [2]

In both the writings of Bell and Fry the critical attention is to be placed on the work of art itself, upon the formal language of the elements and the principles of design, and not upon the



social, political, or economic factors which might be associated with such creations.

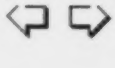
This theory grew out of Fry and Bell's deep involvement with making the works of the impressionists, the neo impressionists, the post impressionists, and finally the early cubist and expressionists acceptable to the English art public of their day.

It seem to me that Munro clearly outlines the roles of both Fry and Bell in the development of early 20 th. century aesthetic theories and gives a rather good definition of the formalist position as it would come to be play out in the

development of early 20 th century aesthetics, art theory, art criticism, and art education during those years right after the first world war. If Fry and Bell tended to dominate the critical dialogue in England in that period what of the United States?

JOHN DEWEY AND ALBERT C. BARNES

In the decade of the first world war educational thought and critical analysis tended to be strongly influenced in this country by the ideas of John Dewey. Dewey's educational philosophy with regards to art education was given its first really significant test at the Barnes Foundation in Merion Penna outside of Philadelphia.

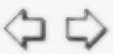


This paper will attempt to show that at least one reason why the modern movement and the ideas of Bell and Fry found so much influence in this country in the early years of our century was because there was already present in the american scene the goundwork for the development of and the general acceptance of the formalistic aesthetic. The early writings of Louis Sullivan [3] frank Llyod Wright [4] and others clearly set the stage for that emphasis upon the nature of form, the developments of formal and abstract visual languages, that become so much a part of later developments in art education in this countyr when the Bauhaus masters arrived from Europe in the late 1930's.

Again,I turn to the writings of Munro for a description of Barnes and Dewey. I do this because Munro was himself a direct witness of the events surrounding the establishment of the foundation as an institution devoted to art education. Munro had been a graduate student of Dewey at Columbia and for several years worked for both Dewey and Barnes at the foundation in Merion when Barnes was busy with his collection, the writing of his first books, and with the development of those educational principles that have been followed to the present time in the galleries and classes in art education at Merion.

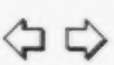
Munro has observed the following about those two very interesting personalities and about the very critical period into which their foundation was to fit as an educational institution. he wrote as follows:

" During the twenties Albert C Barnes, art collector with a background of biochemcial science and influenced by Dewey's naturalistic pragmatism, carried form analysis in painting farther along historical lines then either Bell or Fry. His emphasis, like Fry's was on the clear perception and comparisons of visual forms, but with more attention to continuties of influence from one painter to another and



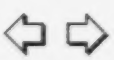
one period to another. He pointed out, even in the greatist artists, traits borrowed from previous ones but transformed into new synthesis and thus were not examples of mere imitation or eclecticism."[Munro,1959] [6]

Barnes wrote in his ART IN PAINTING [1926] [7] a work which put forth both his educational and aesthetic philosophy. Barnes and Dewey who was the director of art education, tried at the Barnes Foundation to establish a school of art education which was based upon a study from the works of art themselves and directed towards what Barnes described as the significance of form.



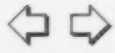
The Barnes foundation exist to this day in almost the same form as it was when first opened by Dewey and Barnes in 1926. It is in reality a museum for art education methods and theory, a museum where one can still explore the nature of art from the presepective of formal analysis in the spirit of Dewey and Barnes. It continues as an instution dedicated to a different view of the museum as an institution. A view which disclaims the idea of the art museum as an institution for the socially and promineint. It has been said that during the lifetime of Alber Barnes, it was easier for a steelworker from Pittsburgh to gain entrance into the museum then it was for the director of the Philadelphia Museum of art.

Iam not at all positive that there is any real difference between Bell's "significant form" and Barnes's " significance of form" at the operational level when teaching about art. It seems to me that Barnes did avoid one problem by not defining form as a noun. With Barnes's definition one cannot play academic games such as to ask' what are insignificant forms?" For Bell was insignificant form the opposite of significant form and hence all that was non-art? It seems that the Barnes definition to be the more usefull and yet are not both writers talking about much the same thing?



The Barnes system avoided some of those lingusitic traps and he was able to develop his approaches to education in art that were in fact based in large part upon his conceptions of the significance of form as a primary vechile for learning about the work of art and about the works of various artists and historical styles.

The journals of the Barnes Foundation, published in two series, one in 1926-31 and the other in the years 1972-78.]**became the basic** writings **in which Albert Barnes and Dewey** clearly identified what were for**them were the** obstacles to a program of education in art.



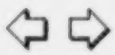
These obstacles were as follows:

a. the ideas of Bell and Fry

b. the emphasis placed on child art

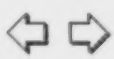
c. the premiums placed on studio experiences rather then upon the critical areas of art history, art criticism, and aesthetics.

The foundation at Merion was devoted to art education founded upon the psychology of William James and on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey.



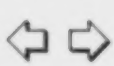
It was one of the very first intregrated and consistent programs of education in the arts which influenced both the picture study movement and the beginning of the traditions of aesthetic preference studies.

In one at least,the picture study movement could have benefited from the formalistic analysis of Barnes and could have de-emphasized the emphasis which it placed on the nature of the subject matter. By so doing the picture study movement insured its' early demise.
{ Is there a lesson for use to learn and an warning to those who are pushing for a specific form of discipline based art education?}



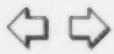
These I believe are some of the connections to present concerns in the field which Eisner called upon all the participants in the conference to attempt.

The contributions of Barnes and Dewey towards a formalistic basis for the analysis of art and for the teaching of art has not been directly made to date, and the value of the methods developed over more then 60 years at Merion could provide some valuable source materials for those of us who are seeking the intregration of the disciplines of art studio, art history, art criticism and aesthetics.

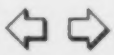


There has been speculation about Barnes as a source for Dewey's philosophy of art and some of his general ideas about aesthetics. When Dewey was associated with Barnes at Merion, it seems that Barnes was the leader in aesthetic conceptions whereas Dewey was valued for general philosophical and educational observations.

The foundation published some of Dewey's later writings about art, such as ART AND EDUCATION and featured his writings in the early issues of the journal. Dewey was given a yearly stipend during Barnes's lifetime and was granted a sum each year in the Barnes will after Barnes was killed in 1951. [8]



The connections between Barnes and Dewey are a fruitfull area for historical research. One of the main problems is that up to this point in time no one has been allowed access to any of the papers and records of the foundation at Merion. There may be many letters from Dewey to Barnes and other papers that are unknown but untill one can get access to those documents it is quite difficult to conduct research about either Barnes Dewey and about the history of the foundation at Merion as an institution devoted to art education.



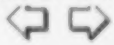
In a paper on the recollections of the teachings of Thomas Munro, also presented at the Penn State Conference, Mary Ann Strokaie has described some of the teaching practices of Munro in this courses in aesthetic conducted at Case Western Reserve University over many years.She interviewed some of his former students and discovered amoung his papers in the archices of the library notebooks which his students mand and which give some idea of his teachings. His notebooks and general approaches seem very much like those being followed in the same time frame at the Barnes foundation.

This documentation of Munro's teaching is yet another connection to Barnes and to Dewey and yet another opportunity for use to view their methods.

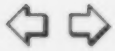
If Barnes and Dewey represent one major art education direction in the 1920's [one direction of some interest today because of its relationship to the ideas of the Getty center for the Arts as to what constitutes a balanced view of education in the arts]; Arthur Wesley Dow, Denman Ross, and Jay Hambidge present a second major trend in art education in those years. They collectively represent a second emphasis upon the formal nature of art but a movement based not in New York but in Boston. [Although Dow taught with **Dewey at Teachers** College, his conceptual roots were in Boston.]

In terms of historical methodology, I prefer to deal with time and place; which those events that took place at the same time and place and I prefer to speculate upon those possible connections that may result from similarities in time and place and which may not necessiarily be documented in a study of the published literature.

Boston was a fascinating place for education in art in the first decade of our century. Ernest Fenellosa had returned from Japan and had assumed leadership in oriential art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Denman Ross published his first and most important book in 1907. Arthur Wesley Dow as forming his conceptions of the nature of composition based



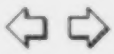
in part at least upon the study of the japanese art that Fenellosa had brought to Boston and In 1912 and 1913 Jay and Mary Hambidge would make frequent trips to Boston to visit with Denman Ross. Adelbert Ames and his sister Blanch Ames were also involved with the study of art, design, color and perception with Ross. These are all threads which will weave in and out in the future decades of art education up untill the beginning of the second world war. [9]



TOWARDS A THEORY OF PURE ART

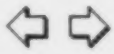
While Bell, Fry, Barnes, and Dewey were more concerned with the critical and historical aspects of education in art; Ross, Dow, and Hambidge focused upon the making of art, upon the development of a language of art that would be based upon the analysis of form as separate from imagery and expression. Ross writing in 1907, called this effort the development of a theory of pure art by which he meant the elements and the princples of design. [10]

This approach towards formalistic aesthetic related to the development of the modern movement in

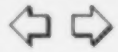


the 1920's and is especially important as a native American development in design theory that in fact pre-dated the similiar formulations of the Bauhaus in Weimer.

ROSS, DOW, AND HAMBIDGE WERE DEVOTED TO FOMALISTIC STRATEGIES FOR THE TEACHING, ANALYSIS, AND THE MAKING OF ART. THEY DEVELOPED SYSTEMS FOR TEACHING DESIGN WHICH DURING THE YEARS BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS DID DOMINATE MUCH OF THE EDUCATION IN THE ARTS. UNFORTUNATELY THE CHILD STUDY MOVEMENT OF THE 1930'S PROVIDED A DIFFERENT CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION IN ART WHICH TOOK HOLD OF THE IMAGINATIONS OF THE LEADING ART EDUCATORS.



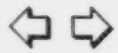
In a concluding paper at the Penn State Conference Arthur Efland presented a general overview of the problems of successive styles in art education thought and offered a new structure, a new paradigm which may help to reconcile the shifts in theory together with the apparent necessity to reject what has gone before. He suggested a model in which one theory ,such as the fomalistic, could be used along with an expressionistic theory with an emphasis on child development, creativity, and spontaneity. The Efland model it seems offers a real potential for new thinking about these questions and allows the art education historian to reconcile in the present much of what is re-discovered from the past. Fomalism as a guide to educational practice does not have to



be sacrificed upon the alter of creativity and self expression or conversly the nature of the deep involvement with the studio does not have to be dropped in favor of a emphasis upon art history and aesthetics.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The emphasis in art education history on the importance of the Bauhaus as a source for the formal education in art and design has been misplaced. There was a very strong formalistic aesthetic in existence in art and design education in this country before the ideas of the Bauhaus, and in fact those American roots of formalism were the sources for much of the modern movement.



REFERENCES

Conclusions

The philosopher, Morris Weitz speaking to a group of art teachers at Ohio State University in March of 1961 made the following observations about the nature of art and the role of art theory.

It is easier to teach art than to talk about its nature. Even so, teachers of art agree that it cannot be taught, or at least effectively taught, unless they can state truly its nature.

Critics, artists, philosophers, and interested amateurs concur with these teachers that no one can talk meaningfully or intelligibly about art without knowing what art is -- what defines its real nature. Clive Bell, a distinguished critic of painting, epitomizes the general attitude towards this dependence of discourse about art upon a theory of it:

> For either all works of visual art have some common quality, or when we speak of "works of art" we gibber. Everyone speaks of "art", making a mental classification by which he distinguishes the class "works of art" from all other classes. What is the justification of this classification? What is the quality common and peculiar to all members of this class?

Is Bell right? Do we talk nonsense when we teach or criticize art without knowing its nature or at least without assuming that it has a nature?

Bell's question certainly suggests a flattering invitation to the philosopher, since the whole point of it is the request of the philosopher a true definition of art that will guarantee our meaningful disscussions and arguments about it. Probably one reason you have so kindly asked me to address you today is that you would like from me -- as a philosopher -- some sort of true, up-to-date definition of the nature of art so that your assumption, that intelligent teaching of art is rooted in a true theory of art, might be defended and justified.

While it may seem to even the casual observer that the formalist engaged the art education profession in seeking out a theory or theories of art as sources for teaching. I will conclude my remarks with Weitz's own conclusions that no single theory of art can provide direction to the art teacher.

When Bell and Fry tell us that painting is essentially significant form, we need not construe their definition as a true statement about all paintings, but, more importantly, as a primer for our visual training: Their definition teaches us how to seek out all the relationships of line and

color, along with the other purely pictorial elements before we start reducing the picture to predominantly representational elements. From their teaching we learn what joy awaits us once we experience the purely formal values of painting and, through these, the purely formal values of all the arts. We can learn from Barnes and Bearenson, too. Barnes' definition is a persistent reminder not to neglect the dynamic, building power of color in painting, to refuse to see color as mere ornament; and Berenson's is a similar invitation, this time, to project our tactile sensations into the visual, pictorial elements of painting, an invitation which, once acted upon, may very well inspire the life-enhancing experience he promises us if we follow his teachings in painting.

Our circle is drawn and I can stop. I began by asking whether the teaching of art rests on a true theory of it. I then tried to show that the teaching of art does not, cannot, and need not rest on such a theory. Rather, that the theories of art comprise different sets of directions--indeed, the best there are--for the richest possible participation in the arts. If my argument is correct, teachers of art should go to the theories of art not for non-existent true definitions but for all their fertile suggestions about the very teaching of art since the theorists themselves have been the best instructors.

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[For Barnes Section from Margaret Johnson]

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